

Fire and water in Mon-Khmer mythology

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The idiomatic use of the term 'fire' for dominance and 'water' for compliance, can be traced from Kom (Mon-Khmer) origin myths up to the present time.

One tradition claims that in the year 631 the Kom (Mon-Khmer) people appeared in a flat area along the Mekong river in the north of Laos. They wanted to make a place on the earth that was beautiful. The area where they lived was fertile because of the Mekong, and many beautiful plants grew naturally. The Kom were good looking, especially the two daughters of the chief Kunmeng, who were called Moon and Ngoom. Kunmeng ruled this flat area, which some said was in the north of Laos. When the Kom first began to wear clothes, they wore long robes, which they wrapped around like monks do. Some said that there were two ancient leaders, Kunmeng and Kunchuong, who ruled over a large area.

Another traditional account claimed that the Kom people ruled the area now called Isan, from 661 until 1204. Yet another view was that the Kom or Kroom people came and stayed at the mouth of the Mekong river. A leader of the Lova or Lava (Lao) people came to live in the same area. These two leaders lived as one and agreed about everything, sharing their goods and meals. Later, however, there was arguing and fighting between them, so the Kom left area and fled to the mountains where the land was not as good.

The Mon-Khmer groups refer to that times as 'the killing time' or 'the yellow shrimp catastrophe', so called because it only lasted a short time, long enough for the shrimp to become yellow in the fire. The dominant group, the Lova, fought with the Kom group. There was a great fire with flames springing up and spreading over a large area, ultimately burning whole villages. [The symbolism here is that the Lova (fire) fought with the Kom (water).] Many people died and the Kom did not have ground to bury them in. The Kom did not want to fight any more, so they fled for two or three days to the mountains until they reached the large river. They were carrying their writing on water buffalo skins. The Kom asked the *dyaang* spirits to vomit water and they begged the spirit *Abom* to make rain, then much water flowed down the mountains and extinguished the fire.

In ancient times the Kom taught their children that 'fire' and 'water' are two things which can be used for good in peoples's lives, or to cause wrong. They taught that it was better to take the part of 'water' and be compliant, than to take the part of 'fire' and be dominant. There must be two sides to cause a fight, so if one side behaved like 'fire', the other side should behave like 'water'. To support this view that one side should give in to the other in order to avoid a fight, there are sayings which have been passed down to each generation. "If one hand claps, it cannot make a noise." Similarly, "When one person speaks there is no

conversation. When one person speaks there is no argument,” and “If we use one foot, we cannot stamp.” The Kom encourage unity [lit. one liver] with others, using good sweet words. A wise person is one who speaks well and avoids arguments.

Kom origin myths describe a beautiful young woman, who lived in the sky and became the moon in order to help people on the earth. At that time trees and animals could talk. Later the animals and forest argued and a great fire and flood occurred, which was called the yellow shrimp catastrophe. During that time a handsome young man appeared who was a flame of fire, which burnt the earth and killed animals. After that catastrophe the spirit *Abom* took the fiery young man away to the sky high above the moon, and he became the sun. Then the sun (fire) ruled over the moon (water). The sun had important *dyaang* spirits, which people on earth obeyed.

Another story relates that when the spirit *Abom* took the young man of fire up to the sky past the moon, people on the earth complained that it was too hot, so *Abom* took him further away. When people still complained about the heat, *Abom* took him still farther away from the earth. Some say that the young man of fire, who became the sun, was the father, and the moon was the mother [another reference to dominance and compliance.]

Continuing the theme of dominance and compliance, the Kom also referred to people as ‘fire’ and animals as ‘water’. Up to the present time the Katu people (a Mon-Khmer group) still use the idioms ‘fire’ and ‘water’. In a confrontation, if one person takes the part of ‘fire’ (dominance), the other must take the part of ‘water’ (compliance), so that an argument will be averted.

There is a Katu saying: “If we adopt characteristics and thinking like fire, we will be in danger. But if we adopt the characteristics of water and have a heart (lit. liver) like water, we will not be in danger.”

In conversation the Katu use the terms ‘fire’ and ‘water’ when referring to individuals or groups, and others understand the meaning of these terms because of their knowledge of this narrative background.

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